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AUTHOR Curley, Theodore J.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

In September 1969, a study of dropouts was initiated in the Quincy, Massachusetts public school system. The aims of the research were to determine actual numbers of students leaving school prior to graduation; to analyze factors involved in the decision to leave school; to compare dropouts with a random sample of non-leavers; and to follow up leavers to assess their progress and retrospective attitudes toward school. School leavers tended to belong to the lower class; have an increased absentee rate; have more academic difficulty and failure; be kept back; and be more negatively evaluated by their teachers. While it would appear that the leaver made his own decision in most cases, interviews revealed that leavers and their parents were given the choice of "orderly withdrawal or suspension," and they selected "orderly withdrawal." Parents also discussed futile efforts to have the child's program altered, resulting in increased disinterest in school. Most were unemployed and retrospectively regretted or questioned their decision to leave school. (Author/DM)

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THE SOCIAL SYSTEM:

CONTRIBUTOR OR INHIBITOR TO THE SCHOOL DROP-OUT

by

Theodore J. Curley, M.S.S.W.

Headquarters Guidance Staff, Quincy Public Schools

Carol Lee Griffin, Ph.D.

Director, Pupil Personnel Services, Quincy Public Schools

Althea Sawyer, Ed.M.

Head Counselor, Quincy Public Schools

and

Albert M. Savitsky, Ed.M.

Headquarters Guidance Staff, Quincy Public Schools

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Every school system regardless of size is confronted with the problem of the dropout. He is not, as many Americans would like to believe, solely the product of the urban ghetto or our migratory work belts, though these sectors contribute to the problem in large numbers. During the decade of the sixties, the United States produced almost 8 million dropouts, which when coupled with advances in automation have resulted in the proportion of youth out of school and out of work being greater now than it was during the depression of the 1930's[1]. And ironically the percentage of dropouts since then has completely reversed. In 1929 less than one out of four graduated from high school; in 1969 only one of four did not graduate[9]. Thus, the observation made by Daniel Schrieber in 1967 sums it up nicely when he stated "The school drop-out for all the authentic concern the public has recently shown is not a new phenomenon, but the problem of the school drop-out is."[8].

The continuing polemic between the critics of today's education who clamor for more relevant curriculum and the educational traditionalists who stress academic excellence has brought about many changes in recent years. These changes have vastly expanded the educational option for our youth thereby keeping them in school longer while at the same time more adequately fulfilling the needs of our labor markets. Yet the problem of the dropout deepens. It is encouraging to note in Silberman's recent book Crisis in the Classroom[9] that by the mid-1970's, 85% of our children will graduate from high school. Yet even if this optimistic prediction materializes, the United States will still be adding almost one million annually to the already massive army of dropouts.

It was in the context of all of these conditions that the current study was initiated in September of 1969 in the Quincy Public School System. The aims of the research were to determine the actual numbers of students leaving school prior to graduation (for reasons other than transfer or death), to analyze the factors involved in the decision to leave school, to compare the School Leaver group with a randomized sample of Non-Leavers and to follow up the School Leavers in order to assess their progress and retrospective attitudes toward school.

SETTING

The city of Quincy, with a population of 90,000 persons, is located just south of Boston. As such, the city, its population and its problems are not unlike those of many suburban communities contiguous to metropolitan core cities. The residents are predominantly lower-middle and middle-class whites, and are drawn from a fairly wide range of occupational and sociocultural subgroups. The 1960 census indicated that 99% were white, and 54% had completed high school or more. At that time, the median income of Quincy families was $6,785, compared with $6,687 for Metropolitan Boston. The majority of persons in the labor force work in Quincy, with manufacturing and retail trade as the principal areas of employment[6].

The public school population numbers 17,000 in K through 12. At the secondary level which is the source of our sample there are 5 junior high schools, 2 high schools and a vocational-technical school which is open to students from both high schools.

DESIGN AND METHOD OF STUDY

In the fall of 1969, administrative procedures were established so that each student who announced his intention to leave school at any time during the school year could be interviewed. When such intentions were made known, the head guidance counselor or his designee would notify the study center and a guidance counselor from a school other than the one from which the student was leaving was called in to administer a standardized interview schedule. This was done to maximize objectivity. Thus, for example, if a student withdrew from Quincy High School, an interviewer would be dispatched from North Quincy High School and vice versa.

Approximately two-thirds of the School Leavers were interviewed prior to formally checking out of school. The students who were not interviewed tended to be those dropped from the attendance register for reasons of chronic, unexplained absence, and who therefore did not formally terminate from school. Others were terminated by administrative action and were not processed through the study center. When these came to the attention of the study center efforts were made to obtain interview data by phone.

Each interviewer was also responsible for administering the Parent Interview Schedule to the parents of each school leaver. Work schedules made it difficult and often times impossible to arrange a face-to-face interview with many parents. Accordingly, telephone interviews were frequently conducted.

A third source of data was the cumulative school record on each school leaver. These records include grades, academic progress, social and emotional observations, medical history, school activities, referrals to pupil personnel services staff and family data.

Selection of the Control Group

A control group of Non-School Leavers was randomly selected in equal numbers from each of the schools involved to determine if they differed in any significant way from the leavers. Grade and sex were those factors controlled. Age was deliberately omitted as a control in order to assess whether or not the experimental group was significantly older than the control group when grade was held constant. The control sample was selected at the end of the school year as it was only at that point one could be sure they were not school leavers. And therefore comparisons between the two groups are based solely upon information contained in the cumulative records.

Follow-up of School Leavers

Follow-up contacts of all the School Leavers were initiated by the same pool of interviewers in December, 1970. This afforded a minimum of a six month assessment of progress since leaving school.

The interviews were conducted over the telephone and were based on a standard follow-up questionnaire. When telephone contact was not possible, the questionnaire was mailed to the School Leaver and/or his parents. In instances where the School Leaver was in the service or otherwise unavailable, either parent was encouraged to fill out the questionnaire and was acceptable as the respondent.

The Sample

The sample consisted of all those who left the Quincy Public School System during the year 1969-1970 for reasons other than transfer to another educational institution or death. Since Massachusetts Law makes school attendance mandatory up to the age of 16 it is virtually impossible for a student to leave before grade nine as he would not have reached the statutory age before that time. Consequently our entire sample comes from grades 9 through 12. Table 1 indicates that the school population for these four grades numbered 5012 students at the year's outset and by year's end 191 or 3.8% had left school.

Table 1

SYSTEM-WIDE SCHOOL LEAVERS - GRADE 9-12

Grade	Total Enrollment	School Leavers N	School Leavers %
9	1295	11	.8
10	1378	67	4.8
11	1228	71	5.7
12	1111	42	3.7
Totals	5012	191	3.8

One hundred thirty eight or 72% of the School Leavers left school in grades 10 and 11, 42 or 27% left in grade 12 and 11 or less than 1% left in grade 9.

A breakdown of School Leavers according to sex as shown in Table 2 indicates that boys constitute 65% of the sample and outnumber girls approximately 2 to 1.

Table 2

SYSTEM-WIDE DISTRIBUTION OF SCHOOL LEAVERS ACCORDING TO SEX

Grade	Male Enrollment	Male Leavers N	Male Leavers %	Female Enrollment	Female Leavers N	Female Leavers %
9	674	10	1.5	621	1	0
10	702	41	5.8	676	26	3.8
11	640	42	6.6	588	29	4.9
12	583	31	5.3	528	11	2.0
Totals	2599	124	4.7	2413	67	2.8

MAJOR FINDINGS

In an effort to identify those variables that increase the likelihood of a student leaving school prematurely, the early school careers of the School Leavers as reflected in cumulative records were compared to a control group of Non-School Leavers. Five salient variables differentiate these groups.

Socioeconomic Status

Although the school system includes children from all socio-economic levels, it is primarily the lower class children who leave school early. Low socio-economic status has long been associated with the school drop-out.[7,11] That this also occurs in Quincy is documented by the data in Table 3, which presents the socio-economic class of each group. The differences between the two groups are highly significant. For example, over 80% of the Non-Leavers fall within the top three classes whereas only 27% of the School Leavers fall within these groupings. Also, 28 families of the School Leavers fell into Class V, the lowest socio-economic group, while none of the Non-Leaver group was included in this category.

Table 3

SOCIAL CLASS*

Social Class	School Leavers N	%	Non-Leavers N	%
I	2	1.2	3	1.8
II	2	1.2	28	16.7
III	42	25.1	11	66.5
IV	93	55.7	25	15.0
V	28	16.8		
TOTALS	167	100.0	167	100.00

* $X^2 = 130.85$ 5 d.f. $p = < .000$

Rate of Absenteeism

Differences in the rate of absenteeism between the School Leavers and Non-Leavers did not appear until grade 6. At the sixth grade level there was a statistically increased rate of absteeism for the School Leavers ($p < .05$) and these differences reflect a progressive deterioration in attendance which became even sharper in grades 8 ($p < .001$) and 10 ($p < .001$).

Academic Performance

Unlike the Non-Leaver group, the School Leavers began experiencing academic difficulty and failure early in their elementary school careers. Elementary grades in reading and mathematics were averaged and each student was then assigned to one of the following four categories: Fail, Basic, Above Average or Superior. Highly significant differences occurred

between the two groups in performance in both reading ($p < .0001$) and mathematics ($p < .0001$). In both areas, 90% of the School Leavers clustered in the Basic to Fail categories as opposed to only 65% of the Non-Leavers. There is considerable overlapping in the middle categories, however.

Grade Retention

A number of studies[3,5] have specifically noted that early school failure and retention set the stage for the prmature leaving of school. The School Leavers had significantly more non-promotions than the Non-Leavers ($p < .0001$). Ninety-nine or almost 60% of the School Leavers had been retained in grade one or more times as opposed to 18 or 11% of the Non-Leavers. Seventeen or almost 10% of the School Leavers were retained more than once, whereas only four or 2.5% of the Non-Leavers were. This means that School Leavers tended to be retained in grade at least five times as often as the Non-Leavers.

Elementary School Teacher Observations

In an effort to examine teacher observations, the available written descriptions on each child at the first, fourth and sixth grade levels were rated as being either negative, positive, negative and positive, or neutral. The teacher comments regarding the School Leaver and Non-Leaver groups are not statistically significant in grade 1. While the School Leaver group tends to be seen in a more negative light in grade 4, these differences are not statistically significant. In grade 6, however, more students who ultimately become School Leavers are described negatively by teachers and in this regard they do differ significantly from the Non-Leaver group.

Thus, teacher descriptions of the School Leaver group became more negative throughout their elementary careers and indeed in grade 6 differ significantly from the descriptions of students who remain in school.

Profile of the Potential School Leaver

A potential School Leaver tends to be a boy from a low socio-economic background whose rate of absenteeism increases to the point of 20 or more days a year in grade 6. In elementary school he is likely to perform at a low level in reading and mathematics, to subsequently be retained in grade one or more times, and to be described in negative terms by his teacher.

Reasons for Leaving School

Six general reasons for leaving school can be identified by viewing the official school records of School Leavers. Thirty-six percent of the group made their own decision to leave. Twenty-eight percent of the sample also made their own decision to leave but this occurred at or shortly after their 16th birthday. It is assumed that this decision was made well in advance of its occurrence. The third largest category or 15% of the sample included those 16 years of age and over who were administratively dropped from active rolls by virtue of sustained and unexplained absence. Eleven percent of the sample left as a result of a crisis situation whereas the remaining 10% left school as a result of administrative suspension and parental request.

It would thus appear officially that the School Leaver in large measure determined his own fate. In approximately 80% of the cases, he left for "work," waited out the statutory age requirement, or simply stopped attending and thereby left by default.

Telling It Like It Is: Interviews With School Leavers And Their Parents

After interviewing many School Leavers and their parents, however, one begins to question the validity of the official school records. In numerous instances, School Leavers and their parents clearly indicate that they were presented with the option of "orderly withdrawal or suspension." They were further advised that if they were suspended, it would jeopardize their chances for re-entry the following year. The School Leavers elected "orderly withdrawal".

Many parents discussed their futile efforts to have their child's program altered and indicated that when this was not possible it led to a marked disinterest in school. Enrollment possibilities in the Work-Study program and the vocational options at the Vocational-Technical School are limited. When, for example, students are unable to enter the program they selected in the Vocational-Technical School, they are often enrolled in a program that is their second or third choice.

Despite a system-wide thrust to create an individualized and flexible curriculum, secondary students continue to get "locked into" a program fairly early in the school year. The curriculum is still too inflexible to make revisions or changes possible beyond a certain point. This points up the tragedy of establishing the school year on an annual basis rather than a semester basis.

There is then considerable discrepancy between official reasons as to why a student left as opposed to their own perceptions. It was clearly the impression of the interviewers that if programs had been available to offer these young people at the time of the follow-up survey, a significant number may well have responded positively and entered an educational program.

Follow-Up

In December of 1970 follow-up contact was made with 145 or 75% of the School Leaver sample to determine their community, employment and possible return-to-school adjustment. The results produced the following distributions: 42 or 29% of the School Leavers had re-entered educational programs in Quincy or other school settings; 25% were working full time; 31% were unemployed; 10% were in the military; and 5% were married females.

It was impressive to learn that 29% of the School Leavers were resuming their education. Several School Leavers had re-entered school only to drop out again prior to the follow-up survey.

The most distressing figure is reflected in the high percentage of School Leavers who are unemployed and who for the most part continue to be dependent on their families.

Retrospective Feelings About Having Left School

In the follow-up survey School Leavers were encouraged to discuss their retrospective feelings about having left school. Fifty-four or 37.7% clearly indicated that they would not have made the same decision again. Twenty-eight or 19.6% said they were not sure. Forty-eight or 33.50% emphatically stated they would have made the same decision and in the remaining 13 or 10% of the cases the information was not ascertainable. Thus, the majority (57.3%) of the School Leavers either regret the decision or already have questioned the wisdom of their choice.

IMPLICATIONS

In America today more than one million young people leave prior to high school graduation every year. While the percentage of dropouts is decreasing, the problems of the dropout in our increasingly technological society have greatly intensified. It is clear that the factors leading to a premature departure from school are complex and multi-determined, involving not only the student, the school and the community, but the entire structure of our social system.

It is no wonder that James B. Conant dramatically refers to dropouts as "social dynamite" in our society. For they represent a growing minority of the hard-core unemployed who in large measure fulfill Eli Ginsberg's dire prediction made in 1965 when he stated:

> The outlook, then, is for further and even absolute declines in the unskilled and semi-skilled blue collar jobs; a probable slowing up of white collar jobs in those sectors where the computer can be installed ... a possible gap between the total number of jobs available and the total number of younger and older persons available for and interested in working.[2]

The school dropout is doomed to sporadic and unrewarding employment, if indeed, he can find a job. While this does not seem possible to the dropout at the time of his decision to leave school, the increasingly impersonal social system soon teaches its hard lesson. For many this means episodic or chronic dependence upon Welfare, and for whom there is little solace in Patrick Moynihan's recent comments that "given the present system, the richer we get, the more dependency we probably should expect."[10]

The educational system must continue to increase the vocational and educational options available to young people. An analysis of the intra-high School Leaver rate indicated that the Vocational-Technical School had a dropout rate of 11.4% as opposed to the city-wide average of 3.8. Primarily because students from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to aspire toward a vocational education and to enroll in the Vocational-Technical School in disproportionate numbers. These same students also tend to leave school in disproportionate numbers. Hence, the need for greater flexibility and increased relevancy in vocational programming.

Moreover, fully 40% of the School Leavers indicated that they would have remained in school if they had been able to participate in a Work-Study program that would allow them to work on a half-time basis. These options were not available.

The social system within society and within the schools has a marked impact upon the dropout and the potential dropout. Society increasingly mandates the necessity of remaining in school and withholds vocational opportunities and avenues of upward mobility to those who do not. As such it inhibits the overall numbers who drop out. The challenge to the school then, as an integral part of the social system fabric, is to make this mandate relevant to the needs of society and the student, particularly those from lower socio-economic background. Lock step curriculum and such punitive practices as grade retention must be abandoned if we are going to curtail reinforcing the failure syndrome. To add further to the army of youth who are alienated both emotionally and productively from the mainstream of American society is no different than stepping up the nuclear arms race. Only through individualization and greater flexibility of educational options can we begin to defuse Conant's "social dynamite".

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